



Sterilized by the State

North Carolina sanctioned a eugenics program that sterilized more than 7,600 people. ESSENCE spoke exclusively to three women who are demanding more than just an apology

BY LISA ARMSTRONG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDRE LAMBERSTON

Nial Ramirez's living room is filled with more than 200 dolls of every race and nationality. Wearing everything from wedding gowns to kimonos, the dolls are neatly displayed in two 6-foot-high glass cases and lined up on her TV cabinet, next to pictures of her daughter, Deborah. One might see them as substitutes for the children Ramirez might have had. In February 1965, when she was 18 and living in Plymouth with her mother and six siblings, Ramirez was sterilized by the state of North Carolina after giving birth to her daughter.

Early in her pregnancy, a state-appointed social worker threatened that if she didn't consent to the procedure, her mother's

welfare benefits would be stopped. "She told me that I had to have this sterilization because if I didn't, my brothers and sisters would have nothing to eat and no house to live in, and it would be all my fault," says Ramirez. "We didn't have enough to eat as it was. I didn't have a choice."

“ I THINK OF ALL THE KIDS I COULD HAVE HAD WITH MY HUSBAND. I WONDER SOMETIMES, WHAT WOULD THEY HAVE LOOKED LIKE? WHO WOULD THEY BE? ” —NIAL RAMIREZ

And so, ten weeks after she gave birth, Ramirez went to the Washington County Hospital to be sterilized, having been assured by the social worker that the procedure was reversible. Eight years later Ramirez got married and discovered the lie. "It's like there's a hole in my soul," she says. "I

think of all the kids I could have had with my husband. I wonder sometimes, *What would they have looked like? Who would they be?*"

During the early to mid-1900's, 32 states passed eugenics sterilization laws, allowing sterilizations based on epilepsy, sickness or "feeble-minded-

ness." Only seven states have publicly acknowledged or apologized to victims of sterilization. North Carolina continued the practice the longest, sterilizing more than 7,600 people between 1929 and 1974.

Eugenicists believed that the human race could be improved if those who were

classified as poor, alcoholics or physically disabled were prevented from having children. When the eugenics program started, the majority of those sterilized were White women, but as African-Americans joined the welfare rolls, an increasing number of those sterilized were Blacks. A 1954 review of the 2,500 sterilizations that had thus far been performed showed that 77 percent were on White women and 23 percent were Black. However, by the late 1960's, 60 percent of those sterilized were young Black women, many without prior knowledge or consent.

The agenda of health officials, politicians and others at the time was to improve the lives of the poor. In actuality it had an adverse affect. In 1959, for example, State Senator Wilbur Jolly tried to institute a bill that asserted if a woman gave birth to two children (who were not twins) out of wedlock, it was proof of her feeble-mindedness.

The state's Eugenics Board never overtly stated that bill was targeting African-Americans. "Disadvantage breeds disadvantage," says Rebecca McNair,

74, a White social worker who worked in North Carolina from 1961 to 1964, whose comment echoes the socially accepted justification used for sterilizations during that time. "I suggested sterilizations for people who would likely have had children with severe disabilities and they would not have been ▸



NIAL RAMIREZ'S ONLY DAUGHTER, DEBORAH CHESSON (RIGHT), HELPS HER MOTHER STAND FIRM IN HER FIGHT AGAINST THE STATE.

able to take care of them. The same way a dark-haired woman would have a dark-haired child, feeble-mindedness was carried on a gene."

Johanna Schoen, author of *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (University of North Carolina Press), also argues that sterilizations were based on economics as opposed to race. "Black people only came to the attention of the Eugenics Board when they came to the attention of the Welfare Board," says Schoen. "The only reason Blacks or Whites or anyone else were candidates for sterilization was because they cost the state money." However, in her book, Schoen quotes social worker Elsie Davis as saying, "The expectation was that Black people were not able to take care of themselves. They were all illiterate, retarded." And many victims insist that social workers and doctors lied about their mental capacity in order to push sterilization orders through.

Unfit to Mother

Lela Mae Dunston was just 13 when she was sterilized, immediately after she gave birth to her son, James. Her

mother signed the consent forms because like Nial Ramirez, she'd been told by a social worker that her welfare benefits would be stopped if she didn't. Dunston says that no one told her anything. She just remembers waking up with a cut on her abdomen, and it wasn't until she was 16 that her aunt told her what had happened. "I cried and cried," says Dunston, now 63. "But then I said, 'Well, there ain't nothing I can do about it now.'"

The tears may have dried, but Dunston is still angry, especially when she reads the document authorizing her sterilization. It states: "She

has very little understanding of her body functions and is easily led into sex relations by anyone. Both Lela Mae and the mother understand that sterilization will result in Lela Mae not being able to reproduce, and both seem happy with this."

In fact, the sterilization has caused Dunston nothing but pain, both emotional and physical. "They gutted us up like hogs, dogs and cats," she says. "And we ain't healed. I just keep praying, asking God to give me strength." Her son, James Moore, 48, consoles her as she sits at her dining table in Raleigh, poring over the documents. "I could have had brothers and sisters," he says quietly. "They didn't have no right taking people's dignity and pride away."

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While most of the women who were sterilized initially felt that they were powerless to do anything, Ramirez decided to take action. In 1973 she became the first woman to file a lawsuit against the North Carolina Eugenics Board. Although

the suit was not successful, she says the doctor who performed the surgery gave her a personal check for \$7,000. Her fight for justice was later picked up by State Representative Larry Womble, who, since 2002, has been working to get the state to compensate sterilization victims. In 2010 Governor Bev Perdue established the North Carolina Justice for Sterilization Victims Foundation to help determine proper compensation for victims. Since then, 72 victims have been identified, but experts estimate that there are probably up to 2,000 still living. "A lot of the victims who come forward typically have the support of a child or a sibling," says Charmaine

Fuller Cooper, executive director of the foundation. "Those who choose not to often have no one."

Janice Black, 59, has Sadie Gilmore Long, her friend of 44 years. The two traveled four hours from their home in Charlotte to speak at hearings about the sterilizations in Raleigh. In 1971, when Black was 18, her father and stepmother had her sterilized. They did not explain why she was being hospitalized. The consent form, which her father signed, states that Black was feeble-minded. Her parents were concerned she would become pregnant. Black, who has a mild mental disability, has been living with Long and her family for the past 20 years. Having raised her stepmother's five children, Black insists that she could have cared for her own. ▾

LELA MAE DUNSTON REVISITS THE ABANDONED SEGREGATED HOSPITAL WHERE MANY STERILIZATIONS ONCE TOOK PLACE.



The love between Black and Long runs as deep as any familial bond. It was Long, 60, who saw Black's scar and, upon learning the horrific story behind it, contacted the foundation. She has accompanied Black to every hearing and will continue to fight until her friend is properly compensated. "God sent me to Janice as a child and I've just stayed where I'm supposed to be," says Long.

Fighting for Justice

In January a task force appointed by Governor Perdue recommended compensation of \$50,000, along with free mental health services for each sterilization victim. A final decision on the proposed restitution payments is expected when the North Carolina General

Assembly stopped their bloodline," she says. "It's genocide."

Although she says she was never tested, Ramirez's sterilization petition indicated that she had an IQ of 55, the equivalent of that of a 9-year-old child, and recommended she be sent to the O'Berry Center, a school for African-Americans with developmental disabilities. "She has been accepted at O'Berry after sterilization and is quite excited about going," her petition reads. But a letter from Vernon Mangum, head of O'Berry, to the Eugenics Board suggests that what Ramirez needed most was education. He wrote: "Stimulation can best be provided in the community. Educable children deteriorate if they are institutionalized."

The words are still

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Assembly convenes in May.

State Representative Earline Parmon, who has been working with Womble to get victims appropriate compensation, acknowledges that no sum could ever repay what they've lost. "You can never fully compensate people when you have actu-

painful for Ramirez to read. "When we first received the papers from the archives, my mother got so upset; she was crying, 'What did I do to deserve this?'" says her daughter, Deborah Chesson, 47. "It hurt me so bad we did not look at the papers for a year." Ramirez recalls her



SADIE GILMORE LONG AND HER SON MIKE MARION HAVE PROVIDED JANICE BLACK (CENTER) WITH A LOVING FAMILY.

marriage crumbling shortly after her husband found she could not bear children. She also tried unsuccessfully to adopt and has sponsored several children around the world through various charities. And, of course, there are her dolls.

In the end, Ramirez Dunston and Black continue to speak out, reliving the horror of their forced sterilizations and the loss of children they could have had. Ramirez is now wheelchair-bound and often cannot travel from her home in Union City, Georgia, to Raleigh for the hearings. Her daughter goes in her place. "We have to keep going until

we get to the goal," says Chesson. "My mother had the potential to do so much more if they'd helped her instead of hurt her. If they'd educated her instead of butchering her, they would have made a world of difference." For Chesson, this fight is bigger than just what her mother had to endure. "I go for my mom and for all of the victims who don't have a voice, and for those who have already passed away," she says.

If you are a victim of the former NC Eugenics Board program, contact the NC Justice for Sterilization Victims Foundation at sterilizationvictims.nc.gov or 877-550-6013.

THE RIGHT TO BEAR CHILDREN

Although eugenics programs officially ended decades ago, many argue that Blacks' reproductive rights are still being infringed upon. "That idea that Black women's wombs are dangerous for children is the same message that supported sterilizing them," says Dorothy Roberts, author of *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Vintage). She notes that some of this stems from conflicting images of Black women held over from slavery. But in recent years, Black women have been at the forefront campaigning against the efforts to cut funding for family planning and defending a more pro-choice agenda. Here's a look at past and present violations of our reproductive rights.

1950's-60's: Blacks made up more than 80 percent of the North Carolinians ordered sterilized by the Welfare Department between 1955 and 1966.

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1970's: Doctors in Alabama gave Depo-Provera, which at the time was experimental, to Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf, just 14 and 12 years old.

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2011: Antiabortion billboards popped up in several cities stating, "The most dangerous place for an African-American is in the womb."